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## Books Are Us

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# Books Are Us

by **Anne K. Robichaux** (Professor Emerita, Medical University of South Carolina) <awkr7721@sc-online.net>

**Column Editor's Note:** This column covers fictitious accounts of people in our industry—librarians, publishers, vendors, booksellers, etc.—people like us. All contributions, comments, suggestions are welcomed. —AR

I'm a fan of southern writer **Anne Rivers Siddons** and read her latest novel, *Islands* (Harper Collins, 2004, ISBN 0-06-621111-5), not expecting fodder for this column. In part three, however, the author introduces a character who is a former librarian from the "Rural Center Library," on John's Island, SC. Siddons' weaves intricate tales and her characters are always richly described, generally well developed, and occasionally eccentric. This depiction of the librarian did not disappoint!

The former librarian is described as tall, broad shouldered, heavy-bosomed, snub-nosed, wide-mouthed, with a "mass of fried-looking rusty red hair and a mask of freckles." She is a single parent of a seven-year-old pageant participant and budding beauty queen, described later as a "trailer park Lolita." She has a biker for a boy friend. She alternately drives a truck or a fuchsia colored motorcycle, decorated with "tongues of painted purple and gold flames" and is actively involved in a local bike club. She has advertised for work on the local Bi-Lo's bulletin board using heavy pink card stock and lavender marker. She describes her skills not in terms of information science but in the areas of housekeeping, baby-sitting, cooking, chauffeur-ing and home repair.

The narrator of the story responds to the ad, inviting her to interview for a job as housekeeper, cook and part-time companion for an ailing woman. Oh, it also turns out, conveniently, that the former librarian has previously worked in a nursing home. She rode to the interview on her motorcycle, wearing tight black jeans, a black leather, metal-studded jacket, her "melon-like" breasts bra-less under a stretch pink turtleneck t-shirt, or as described by another character in the story: "a Harley-riding librarian with boobs like the front of a '53 Studebaker and a Little Miss Tomato Princess for a daughter."

When asked what she had done at the library she responded: "I was the librarian. I have a degree in library science." When admonished that she should not waste her education by cleaning houses she indicated that she could make better money cleaning and cooking and enjoyed doing this, adding that she reads all the time and has taught reading to her daughter and other young children. Besides, her husband ran out on her and she needs the money. She lives from paycheck to paycheck in a cinder block apartment building.

Aside from the amusing, if not atypical, physical description and flamboyance of the librarian character, we understand that she did not earn a livable wage in her profession. She is further presented as a genial, capable, nurtur-

ing, sensitive, caring, hard working and intelligent individual who loves books, and during her employment in the story, discovers and learns to love classical music. She also turns out to be the character responsible for exposing another character's hidden obsession, and is crucial to the "surprise" ending of the book.

For more about author **Anne Rivers Siddons**, check out **Harper Collins Website**, <http://www.harpercollins.com/catalog/>.

While the librarian in Siddons' novel could earn more money as a house cleaner than as a librarian in a rural public library, earning a livable wage may be more of a true concern than an actual stereotype of the profession. On Sunday, May 16th my husband and I were listening to **National Public Radio** and heard the program with the puzzle editor of the *NYTimes*, **Will Shortz**. The contestant that morning was librarian, **Julie Zelman**, from Bennington, VT. One of the questions presented was: "What is earning less than \$15,000 a year?" Without hesitation Julie responded "a librarian's income." Laughter followed the response, but it did bring home one of the perceived, if not true, concerns of our profession. (Note: The expected response was "what's considered low income," which Julie added after the laughter subsided.)


Salary issues are at the core of the 1921 silent era film, *The Blot*, written and directed by **Lois Weber** (available in DVD, 2003, Milestone Film & Video and MMIV Image Entertainment). Among the main characters are a scholarly, but underpaid professor, and his pretty, young daughter, *Amelia*, who works in the pub-

lic library to help with the family finances. In one scene, *Amelia* is depicted checking books in and out; in another she has become ill, but rises from her sick bed to walk a mile and a half to the library, in worn shoes (she's placed cardboard in them to cover holes in the soles) and worn gloves, to pick up her desperately needed, though meager, pay check. She is depicted as having class, even though she has no wealth. But *Amelia* does not lack for admirers: the next door neighbor, the son of a well paid immigrant shoemaker; the threadbare, shy, yet well-bred minister; and a wealthy brash student of the professor's, whose father happens to be a college trustee.

The movie is based on an article from the *Literary Digest*, April 30, 1921, on impoverished college teaching. The gist of the movie is that those paid to teach

and nourish the mind, and to feed and nourish the soul, are paid less than common laborers, which is a "blot" on civilization. Both the professor and the minister resort to outside work in order to eke out a living. In somewhat of a cliché ending, the daughter, *Amelia*,

chooses the rich college student, so we must assume she, at least, has solved her financial concerns.

In April's issue of *ATG*, I mentioned the Website, **Library Career Romances** ([www.jenw.org/home.htm](http://www.jenw.org/home.htm)) featuring career romance or career girl novels published during the 1940's - 1960's. Its author, **Jen Wolfe**, recently sent an email that she has added seven more novels to her site and to please stop by for a visit! 

## And They Were There — Charleston Conference 2004

### Reports of Meetings — 24th Charleston Conference Issues in Book and Serial Acquisition, Charleston, SC, November 3-6, 2004

Column Editor: **Sever Bordeianu** (University of Mexico) <[sbordeia@unm.edu](mailto:sbordeia@unm.edu)>

**Preconference — Statistics for Librarians — Wednesday, November 3, 2004 —**  
Presenters: **Philip Davis** (Life Sciences Bibliographer, Cornell University), **John McDonald** (Acquisitions Librarian, California Institute of Technology)

Report by **Ramune Kubilius** (Galter Health Sciences Library, Northwestern University) <[r-kubilius@northwestern.edu](mailto:r-kubilius@northwestern.edu)>

Lead instructor **Philip Davis** (Cornell University) and his "teaching assistant" (Phil's words), **John McDonald** (California Institute

of Technology) conducted a Wednesday morning session for a **Francis Marion Hotel Gold**

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